

ABSTRACT

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When designing interventions to promote pro-environmental behaviors, practitioners may choose between techniques based on, for example, education, incentives, or social norms. These intervention techniques may, however, target different kinds of motivation, and therefore differ in their psychological and behavioral implications. The aim of this thesis is to assess norm-based intervention techniques targeting energy conservation.

Study I compared a contest-based with a norm-based intervention technique. In two online experiments participants performed pro-environmental tasks (writing energy-saving tips and fictive recycling) while provided with either normative or competitive feedback. Results showed that participants assigned to the contest-based intervention technique engaged more intensively in both tasks. Participants in the norm-based intervention technique showed a tendency for stronger intention for future energy conservation and stronger activation of personal norms for non-targeted pro-environmental behaviors.

Study II applied the findings from Study I in two field experiments. Participants were randomly assigned to a norm-based or a contest-based intervention targeting electricity conservation. In the contest, both experiments confirmed an intensive but short-lived effect of electricity conservation. Experiment 1 confirmed increase electricity saving attitudes and more long-term electricity conservation in the norm-based interventions. Results of Experiment 2 did not replicate these findings, but supported a positive spillover effect between electricity and water conservation only in the norm-based intervention.

Study III tested a conceptual development of the descriptive norm. Analogous to the separation between injunctive proscriptive and prescriptive norms, we suggest that the descriptive norm can be separated into signaling others' engagement (a descriptive "do-norm") or disengagement (a descriptive "don't-norm"). In line with our hypothesis that don't-norms are more influential, results from three experiments consistently showed that don't-norms outperformed do-norms (15%, 10% and 19%). However, only the third experiment supported the difference with statistical significance.

Study IV examined compliance to prescriptive and proscriptive norms, targeting energy conservation. In a 2 (words: prescription vs. proscription) \times 2 (picture: prescription vs. proscription) between-subject design, participants were exposed to prompts promoting energy-saving. Results supported the hypothesis, showing that more participants (88.1%) conformed to prompts including both prescriptive and proscriptive content than to prompts including either prescriptions or proscriptions (78.6%). A follow-up experiment indicated that these results were driven by attention and reactance. Finally, when asked which prompt participants would use to influence other people to act pro-environmentally, the majority of participants (80.1%) chose the prompt that was least effective in our field experiment.

Keywords: Social norms, Contests, Attitudes, Interventions, Pro-environmental behaviors

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